

Why Posture Is Important

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Often, the first step in helping somebody sing better is helping him or her achieve a better sense of physical alignment. As I tell my students, “If your tuba has a ding in it, it can’t play at its peak potential.” The human body functions the same way. There are six main reasons that physical alignment is critically important for singers

First, the body functions best when certain conditions exist. The purpose of the skeletal system is to support, protect, and give shape to the body. If the bones of the skeleton are stacked correctly, the body is in its most architecturally sound configuration. The bones of the skeleton support the weight of the body. The purpose of the muscles in the body is to support and move the skeleton. Three categories of muscles control movement. The deep, postural muscles are relatively weak but have amazing endurance. There are hundreds of these tiny muscles that connect all the little bones of the spine and neck. Though, individually, they are quite weak, taken as a unit they are responsible for the stability of the spine and, thus, the entirety of the body. The larger superficial muscles are responsible for the gross, powerful movements of the body. Muscles such as the pectoralis major, latissimus dorsi, the quadriceps, etc. are the muscles responsible for jumping, pushing, pulling, running, and allowing you to move your friend’s piano up three flights of stairs. These muscles are incredibly powerful

(especially if one frequents the gym); however, they lack endurance when compared to the deep muscles. The third main group of muscles are the intermediate muscles. These muscles assist with both support and movement.

When the body is not aligned correctly, the burden of support shifts from the skeleton and deep postural muscles to the larger superficial muscles. While these muscles are perfectly capable of handling the increased load, they lack the endurance to do so for a long time. Overtime they become fatigued, giving rise to the painful knots which massage therapists are so good at removing in the short term, and which we are so good at recreating once we return to our slouched postures in front of the computer. A properly aligned spine can allow these more superficial muscles to relax, creating ease and efficiency in the way the body moves and supports itself.

The second reason alignment is important is because the breathing mechanism functions best when certain conditions exist. The lungs attached to the ribcage and the ribcage attaches to the spine. If the spine is out of alignment, the ribs are not able to expand to their fullest potential. This will limit the ability of the singer to inhale completely. The overworked and misused muscles will not work synergistically to control the ever-changing balance in air pressure and air flow that is required during the singing process. Though a singer may be able to make a decent sound, it will never be as efficient as it would be if the body was aligned correctly. For more information on this topic, please read [A Review of the Breathing Mechanism for Singers: Parts I and II](#).

The third reason alignment is important is because the voice works best when certain conditions are present. I tell my students that nothing functions in isolation- a change in one area of the body will elicit a change in another area. Misalignment of the spine will cause misalignment in the shoulder girdle. This forces muscles of the upper back, upper chest, and neck to assist with the support function, causing them to fatigue and chronically tighten. This tightening of the neck muscles influences the way in which the muscles of the larynx and vocal folds work. The tension in the upper chest and neck can produce a tight, pressed, pinched sound. This combines with the inability of the breathing mechanism to provide appropriate subglottic pressure, and the result is a pressed voice that may exhibit limited range and vocal fatigue. Aligning the body correctly allows all of these muscles to function freely and efficiently. For more information on phonation, please read *An Anatomical Review of the Laryngeal Mechanism*.

The fourth reason alignment is important is because it allows the singer to perform to the best of his or her ability. Once a performance begins, there is often very little a singer can control. They have no control over whether their costumes works, whether their colleagues miss their cues, whether the conductor decides to take a significantly faster tempo, etc. One of the main purposes of technique is to establish a baseline of success. It can be very comforting to a singer to know that if they are aligned correctly and use that freedom of alignment to take an efficient breath, they are setting

themselves up in the most optimal way for success on stage regardless of what else happens. And, as I jokingly tell my students, if nothing else, “you can make sure you look good when you walk out on stage.”

The fifth reason alignment is important is because it can allow the audience to relax. Part of the job of a performer is to remove as many barriers as possible between himself/herself and the audience. Anxiety is one of those barriers. A collapsed chest, shrunken shoulders, drooping head, and other common misalignments convey a message of self-consciousness, insecurity, and inability on the part of the singer. Audiences respond with varying emotions including anxiety (“Oh that poor thing” or “Oh no, a high note is coming?”) or apathy (“Great, another boring singer”). On the other hand, proper alignment allows singers to appear at ease with their bodies, their voices, and their ability. The old adage “Fake it ‘till you make it” can apply. In fact, Timoth Gallwey, author of *The Inner Game of Tennis*, believes that imitation and play-acting are two very powerful methods for promoting both short-term and long-term change.ⁱ

The final reason alignment is important is for the overall health of the individual. If the body is functioning well, there is a reduced chance for injury. Modalities such as Alexander, Feldenkrais, Pilates, massage, etc. not only improve alignment and one’s ability to move freely but also improve general quality of life.

The previous information is a rationale for why teachers of singing should address posture in their students. Often concepts of resonance, registration, and tone receive precedence over physical alignment- they are more glitzy and glamorous. However, a solid physical foundation is necessary to make all those more exciting aspects of technique possible.

¹ Timothy Gallwey, *The Inner Game of Tennis*, rev. ed. (New York: Random House, 1974), 43.